Fonetic English Tutor Quick Guide v1.0

Nov 5, 2026 · @Chris Stephen

More information about Fonetic English and how to teach different students in available in the Tutor Reference Guide in the Resources Tab.

1. How Fonetic English works

The problem. English spelling does not tell a reader how a word is said: which syllable is stressed, where the syllables divide, which characters are silent, or the sound a character makes when it is not making its usual sound. A student meeting an unfamiliar word has to ask a teacher or look it up. Of the 26,125 English words we have marked up into Fonetic English, 94 per cent are missing at least one of those four things. English spelling is severely information deficient.

What Fonetic English does. It adds the missing information to the English word and leaves the spelling unchanged. So a student meeting an unfamiliar word can sound it out correctly, and what they learn is the real English word.

Reading repurposes the speech part of our brain to hear and understand silent words we say in our minds as we read. So it should not be a surprise that we understand a lot more when we read at the speed we speak, which is fluent reading. If we read fluently, we need to see a word and recognize it instantly. The quickest way to get to that instant recognition is to sound the word out.

Humans have evolved to remember what makes sense. If we show the sound of each character in a word, the word can be sounded out, and the spelling and shape of the word are easier to remember because they make sense.

Fonetic English shows where every syllable divides, so syllabification does not have to be taught. A student sees the syllables of a word on the page. If the student knows the sound of each syllable, the student can sound out the word syllable by syllable. If the student does not know one syllable, the student only needs to sound out that one syllable to sound out the word.

A student who can sound a word out a few times can usually recognize it just by seeing it. And because the spelling does not change, they recognize that word in any font, with or without the Fonetic English markup, so there is no transition and nothing to unlearn.

2. The ten tools

The same ten tools serve native English speakers and ESL students. What differs is how much time is spent in each tool. The tools run in a web browser. A laptop currently gives the best access.

The rule. Word Sounds and Sounding Out Syllables when the student needs practice. The FE Dictionary when the student needs a particular word.

Tool	What it does	When to use it
English Sounds	Teaches the 42 sounds and the Fonetic English character for each sound.	Every student, first. Students must learn each digraph as one sound.
Pronunciation Instructions	Mouth movements from the front and in cross section, video, and a microphone to record and compare.	When a student cannot produce a sound. Central for ESL students.
Soft Sounds	The soft sounds f, h, l, p and th, each followed by every vowel.	Mainly for ESL students who doubt they are producing a soft sound correctly.
Missing Sound Training	A sound that does not exist in the student's first language. Production, then listening, then recording and self-correction.	ESL students, once the profile shows which sounds are missing.
Difficult Sound Training	Two sounds the student does not tell apart, taught with real word pairs.	ESL students, and native speakers with specific sounds such as voiced and unvoiced th.
Sounding Out Syllables	Builds a syllable one sound at a time: ch, then ch ar, then ch ar t.	The core decoding practice for every student, from the first session.
Word Sounds	The same as Sounding Out Syllables, for whole words. A sound is played and the student selects the word.	Once syllables are becoming automatic.
Vocabulary	Basic Vocabulary (A0 to A1) with translation. Intermediate Vocabulary (A2 to B2), where the student infers the meaning from two sentences.	From early on, alongside the decoding work.
FE Dictionary	Any word: the markup, audio, progressive sounding out, record and compare, translation, definitions, phrasal verbs and idioms.	Whenever the student needs a particular word.
eReader	Real text with the markup on or off, and comprehension questions that give a hint and a second attempt.	From early on, and more as the student progresses. Reading is the point of every other tool.

The word chart has three sounds: /ch/ /ar/ /t/. The letters /c/ /h/ /a/ /r/ /t/ do not make the sound of chart. A digraph is one sound, not two sounds joined together.

Tip: to have two tools open at once, right-click the FELS tab, choose Duplicate, and open a second learning tool in the new window. The pairing used most is the FE Dictionary beside the eReader.

3. Teaching native English speakers

A native English speaker who struggles to read has one core problem. The student cannot reliably connect written letters to the sounds the student already knows. The student can speak the language and knows thousands of words.

The five stages. The stages overlap once the sounds are known.

1. English Sounds. The 42 sounds and the Fonetic English character for each sound.
2. Syllable Sounds. Progressive sounding out of the most common syllables.
3. Word Sounds. Recognising whole words by sight.
4. Vocabulary. Basic Vocabulary, then Intermediate Vocabulary, and prefixes and suffixes.
5. The eReader. Reading real text.

The first session (about an hour)

1. Talk first (5 to 10 minutes). Find out the student's age, school year, reading level and feelings about reading. Explain briefly what Fonetic English is.
2. English Sounds (15 to 25 minutes). Go through Learning Mode together. The student clicks each sound and repeats it aloud. Then move to Advanced Practice and watch the response times. Do not try to finish all 42 sounds.
3. Sounding Out Syllables, Learning Mode (10 to 15 minutes). Demonstrate progressive sounding out on a simple syllable such as cat, ment or tion. Then let the student try.
4. Independent use (10 minutes). Show the student how to move between Learning Mode and Practice Mode, replay a sound and find the response times. Homework only works if the student can do it alone.

Different students

- Young children (ages 4 to 7). Use Learning Mode only at first. Keep sessions short and varied. Use A0 and A1 vocabulary, because the child already knows these words in speech.
- Older children, teenagers and adults with reading difficulties. Move quickly through English Sounds. Spend more time on syllables. Start reading soon, using Basic Vocabulary to find the reading level. Frame every difficulty as the spelling system's, never the student's: English spelling is the problem, not the student.

Once the student has enough sounds, syllables and vocabulary to make sense of a text, spend much of each session reading.

4. Teaching ESL students

An ESL student may face up to three problems at once:

- Sounds the student cannot hear or produce.
- Words whose meanings the student does not know.
- A spelling system that does not match the sound.

Fonetic English solves the third problem for every student. The tutor also works on the first two. So ESL teaching starts with sounds and pronunciation.

Know the student first. Find out the student's native language, whether the student can read in that language, what English the student has studied, and the student's goal, such as IELTS, work or study. A student literate in a phonetic language such as Spanish or Indonesian already understands sounding out. A student whose language uses Roman letters with different sounds must unlearn some letter sounds.

Select the student's language in English Sounds. Fonetic English has compared the sounds of the student's first language to the 42 English sounds. The tool groups the English sounds into same sounds, close sounds and missing sounds. Missing sounds need the most practice.

The five stages

1. English sounds. All 42, with emphasis on the missing and difficult sounds. From the first session until solid.
2. Pronunciation. Mouth movements, recording and self-correction, and hearing the difference between sounds. Alongside Stage 1.
3. Syllable sounds. Progressive sounding out and recognising words by sight. Once the student knows the Fonetic English characters.
4. Vocabulary. Word meanings learned through short sentences. Alongside Stage 3.
5. Extended reading. eReader texts with comprehension questions. From about a Grade 3 reading level.

The first session (about an hour) is entirely sounds

1. Talk first (10 minutes).
2. English Sounds (30 to 40 minutes). Work through the same sounds, then the close sounds, then the missing sounds. For a missing sound, open Pronunciation Instructions in a second window with the student's camera beside it. Note every sound that needs more work.
3. Self-correction (10 minutes). In Missing Sound Training, the student records a sound with the red microphone and plays it back against the reference. Repeat until the student can self-correct without help. Recording lets the student practise well without a tutor present.
4. Homework (5 minutes). Set specific sounds for recording practice.

How the session balance shifts. These are rough guides, not rules.

Sessions	Typical balance
1 to 3	70% sounds and pronunciation, 30% syllables and Fonetic English characters
4 to 6	40% sounds and pronunciation, 40% syllables, 20% vocabulary sentences
7 to 12	20% sounds (targeted gaps only), 40% syllables and word recognition, 40% vocabulary

Sessions	Typical balance
13 and after	10% sounds (as needed), 30% vocabulary, 60% reading

Find out what the student does not know, and teach that. Do not work through a fixed sequence if the student already knows parts of it.

5. Every session, for every student

The goal is automaticity. Recognition becomes so fast that the student does not have to think. The tools measure automaticity through response time. Falling response times mean the student is learning.

- Check the dashboard before the session. Look for slow response times, repeated errors and homework not done. Work on those items in the first 10 minutes.
- Praise effort and the willingness to correct, not right answers. A wrong answer tells the student's brain what needs to change.
- Keep errors low-key. The system corrects them automatically.
- Teach digraphs as single sounds, never as two sounds to be blended.
- Read every day. Every word sounded out is a word on its way to becoming a sightword.

When a student stumbles on a word while reading

1. Ask the student to look at the Fonetic English cues on the word.
2. If the student cannot decode the word, sound out the syllables one at a time.
3. If the student still cannot manage it, look the word up in the FE Dictionary and hear it together.
4. Move on quickly.

Homework. Be specific. For example: "Do Practice Mode on syllable lessons 1 to 20. Aim to get your response time below 2 seconds for each one." Short daily practice of 10 to 15 minutes works better than one long session. The tools are self-correcting, so the student can practise alone.

The Tutor Reference Guide sets out the method in full: why it works (Part 1), the tools and the FE Dictionary (section 2), vocabulary teaching (section 3), students with a diagnosis (section 4), native English speakers (Part 2) and ESL students (Part 3). Tutor certification is tested on the Tutor Reference Guide.